



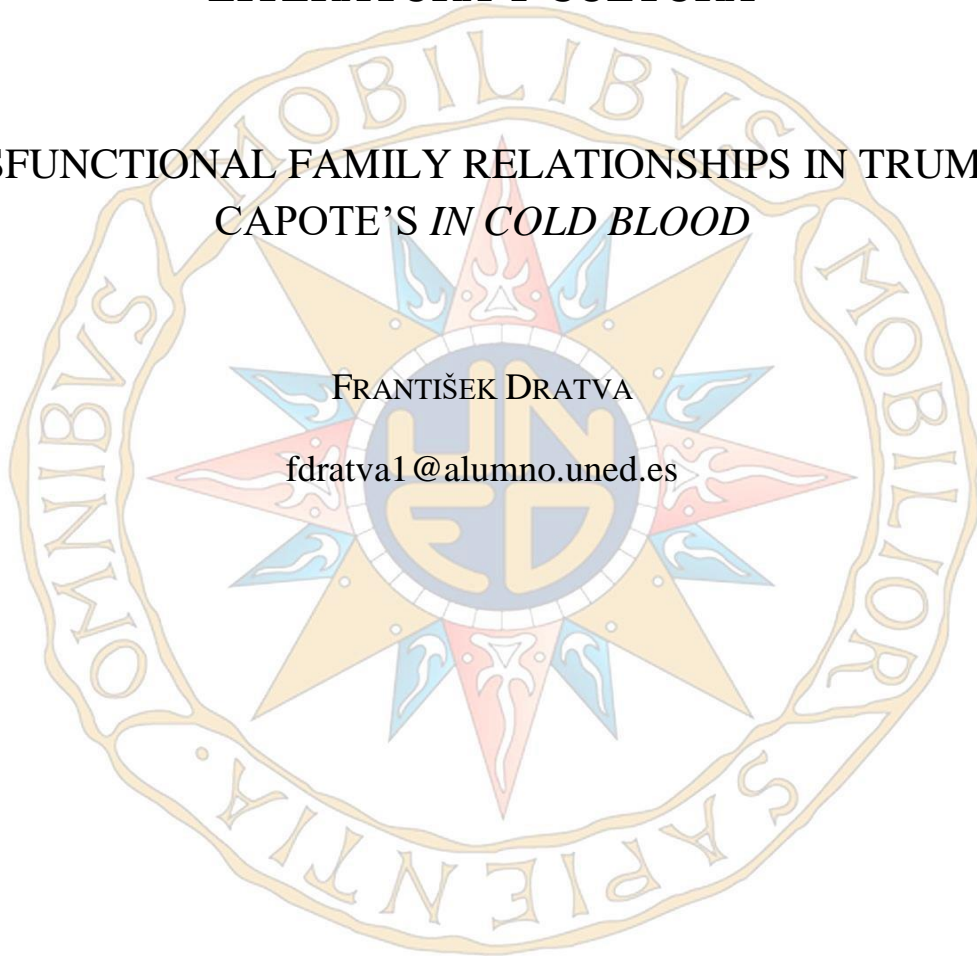
TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA,
LITERATURA Y CULTURA**

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN TRUMAN
CAPOTE'S *IN COLD BLOOD*

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Abstract

This Bachelor's thesis is divided into three main parts. The introduction presents the topic of dysfunctional family relationships as they appear throughout *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (1966), justifies its importance for the core of the book, establishes the objectives of this study, offers an insight into the current state of the question as well as into the most important bibliography, and sketches the methodology that was applied in this work. Being the second and most developed part of the analysis, the main body is divided according to the characters whose dysfunctional family relationships are described and analysed. The last sections are devoted to the conclusion and bibliography.

Keywords

Dysfunctional family relationships, *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic relevance

Truman Capote declared that, in order to write *In Cold Blood*, he managed to collect a vast quantity of information that amounted to thousands of pages of written material (Plimpton 4). The fact that he opted for including specifically those accounts, statements and fragments related to family backgrounds marred by addictions, violence and lack of care is symptomatic of the significance of the topic. Moreover, many experts on Capote's work and life highlight the similarities that might be established between his and Perry Smith's childhood and the broken ties with their relatives that arguably affected both men over their lives.

Some scholars defend that another of the author's purposes for writing the novel was to expose the callousness of the maximum penalty and the inability of the US society of his time to help citizens coming from dysfunctional family backgrounds to overcome all the odds related to their difficult upbringing. Nevertheless, I will also point to an array of other functions the issue may fulfil in Capote's masterpiece, such as characterization, empathy development or even atmosphere creation.

The academic relevance of the subject is based on its recurrence in the novel as well as on the vast body of material about the murderers' background that Capote gathered and included in the novel. The issue appears again and again throughout the book and is not restricted only to the main characters: Dick and Perry. Dysfunctional family relationships are a phenomenon that Capote analyses in-depth in different parts of his most famous work and associates with a host of the characters that populate it.

In addition, Capote did not hesitate to include long passages from the autobiographical statements that the psychiatrist Dr. Jones suggested both murderers should write. Apart from these pieces of text that are reproduced verbatim, the reader will also encounter the biography written by Perry's father in order to help him to receive a parole, which offers a valuable insight into the suffering Perry experienced as a consequence of his difficult family background from the point of view of one of his parents. Even though Barbara, Perry's only surviving sibling at the moment of the murders, is a character that is ill-disposed

and even hostile toward the novel's protagonist and rejects and fears a meeting with him, Capote offers a fragment in which Barbara recalls some moments of the childhood that Perry and herself spent together. Her account is just one of the multiple pieces that the author assembled for the purpose of creating the mosaic of Smith's ruined family relationships.

1.2 Literature review

The current state of the art in the scholarly investigation of *In Cold Blood* is marked by the close attention that is paid by critics to the ground-breaking nature of this book. Some critics, mostly those that exposed their conclusions shortly after the book had been published for the first time, hailed the advent of a new literary subgenre, the nonfiction novel (Wróbel 6), as Capote labelled it, and embarked on establishing its ties with the more general movement of New Journalism (Olsza 135, 138). The most important representative of this stance was Capote's fellow writer Tom Wolfe (Brady).

On the other hand, quite a few scholars (Sécail, Fonseca Santos, etc.) insist that Capote draws on the previous literary tradition and others (Conolly and Haydar, for example) even criticise him for having made up a great many episodes that form part of the book, which therefore fails to be the true account of the multiple murder the writer intended to compose. Many of the secondary sources I have analysed present a detailed examination of which episodes of the plot are rooted in actual events and which are due to Capote's imagination. An emblematic example of a passage that never happened in the real life is the final scene, in which the agent Al Dewey, who helped to discover and capture the murderers, encounters Susan Kidwell, Nancy Clutter's best friend, at the cemetery. This fictional episode makes it possible for the plot to close a circle. Still, many critics value this ending positively and state that the freedom Capote made use of in this type of scenes does not contradict the overall veracity of the narrated history.

In spite of being this study focused primarily on the novel as a literary creation, it seems appropriate to mention that a number of studies are specifically devoted to contrasting the plot of *In Cold Blood* with official registers, reports or interviews carried out by persons different from Truman Capote and Harper Lee.

Regarding the reaction the publishing of the book aroused in Holcomb, it may be said that many of its inhabitants criticised the representation of the Clutter family (and particularly of Bonnie), which at some points of the book is far from appreciative. Yet, some informants praise the portrayal offered by the author as being quite accurate. This may be considered another sign of how important for Capote the depiction of the different issues that may bedevil family life was (Lee 25).

Furthermore, there is also a relevant body of scholarship highlights the importance of the novel for the development of US journalism of its times (Brady), while other studies relate the Clutter murders to similar killings that took place in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s and compare the different modes of narrating the events both in journalism and literature. Capote himself informs at one point of his masterpiece that in the years following the Holcomb murders many similar or even more deadly assassinations took place in the United States.

Various analysts opted for putting *In Cold Blood* under a different type of lenses and carried out studies based on race, LGTB and gender (Rash), game theory (Wainwright), lawsuit representations (Almog) or numerous types of metaphors, for instance those linked with Paradise (Rash) or animals. These different kinds of scrutiny the novel was subject to reveals its multidimensional nature and helps to explain its everlasting popularity.

Other scholars pay attention to the issue of the capital punishment in the United States and its development (Tell) and many of them argue that the empathy Capote showed especially for Perry and the condemnation of the death penalty that can be inferred from the novel justify this approach (Wróbel 17, 29).

Closely related to the empathy approach is the Master thesis called *Negative Empathy in Narrative: Humanizing Evil in In Cold Blood and Les Bienvéillantes*, written by Sara Baila-Bigné, which will serve as one of the most relevant secondary sources. By way of illustration, Baila-Bigné pinpoints the reason for the compassion that the readership may come to feel for Perry: his “wretched biography” (33).

Regarding the topic of dysfunctional family relationships, there do not seem to be many studies that are devoted solely to this issue or analyse it in depth. The studies that have contributed the most to the writing of this end-of-year project are *A Cold Look at the American Society: Truman Capote's In Cold*

Blood between Document and Metaphor by Małgorzata Olsza, *An insight into a murderer's mind in Truman Capote's In Cold Blood* by Barbara Wróbel, *Literally Reality: Defining the Nonfiction Novel Through Truman Capote's In Cold Blood and Norman Mailer's The Armies of the Night* by Jesse Brady and also "Maybe It Was You": *The implications of Southern Gothic Elements of Criminality, Sexuality, and Race in Truman Capote's In Cold Blood* by Shirley Allan Rash.

In her work, Olsza establishes a parallelism between Capote's novel and the Gothic aesthetics. She highlights the Gothic features that intervene in the description of the setting (Holcomb in general and the night of the murders in particular) and at the same time she does not share the positive views some other scholars show in relation to the assassinated family and their relationships. I will comment and further develop her conclusions in the section devoted to the Clutters.

Barbara Wróbel foregrounds the relevance of both murderers' family background and examines not only the more obvious case of Perry and his long record of difficulties associated with his relatives, but also tries to find the roots of Dick's grudge and violence in some of the frustrations that date back to his adolescence. In a fragment that is of high interest for this study, she explains the frustration that overbears Dick by pointing out the expectations his parents had created, and he was not able to fulfil.

Jesse Brady may stand as a representative of the scholars that in the recent past questioned the status of the Clutters as models of a typical medium-class US family, whose life is supposed to be marked by success, love, and happiness. In her innovative study, the author both underscores the tragedy that Mrs. Clutters mental illness supposed for the family and friends as well as the falsity of some of the elements that a number of previous experts construed as signs of Mr. Clutter's prosperity.

Another literary scholar that recently undertook the project of demystification of the Clutter family and shed light on their personal and familiar predicament is Shirley Ellen Rash. Her depiction of the murdered family cannot be more distant from some of the idyllic interpretations published previously. Rash points to phenomena as frustration, despotism, dark impulses, and falsity (all of them fit perfectly in the puzzle of the Southern Gothic) and is one of the pillars on which I will uphold my analysis of the rich farmer and his family.

In addition, there exist a good deal of studies that, in spite of not dealing with the chosen topic in a greater detail, make a relatively extensive mention of it and may be used as secondary sources too. An article that proved to be of a great value for my purpose is “*As Gracefully as Greek Temples*”: *Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood as a Greek Tragedy*” by Justin M. Edge. The portrait Edge creates of Mr. Clutter differs radically from the idyllic description of this character’s attitude and behaviour that can be found in other articles. The negative depiction of Mr. Clutter and his possible contribution to his wife’s frail health might be linked to the abovementioned Olsza’s investigation of the “Gothic” elements of the novel.

One of the possible explanations that literary critics provide for the strong empathy Truman Capote developed for Perry Smith, apart from Smith’s alleged homosexuality and artistic curiosity, was the identification the writer came to feel with the murderer on the basis of a similarly loveless childhood. Even though the elements related to the author’s real life fall out of the scope of this paper, it is an important phenomenon that should be at least alluded to.

I also would like to stress out that, unfortunately, most of the studies on *In Cold Blood* that are available do not treat the issue of dysfunctional family relationships at all. Thus, they are not relevant for this project.

On the other hand, I would like to mention that the most important and only primary source for this analysis is Truman Capote’s novel itself. I will be working with the Penguin Books edition that was published for the first time in 1966. As I aim to limit the scope of this project to literature and the original Capote’s creation, I will not consider the different film adaptations of the novel. However, some of the recently published dissertations that compare the book with the different movie adaptations proved to be of relevance for shedding a new light on some of the issues related to my main subject.

1.3 General objectives and main hypothesis

The aim of this end-of-degree project is the analysis of dysfunctional family relationships and their importance and purpose in Truman Capote’s novel *In Cold Blood*. The majority of critics that devoted themselves to the study of this work agree on the fact that its main topics are crime, its origins, consequences,

punishment as well as the appropriateness or not of the death penalty, but also an examination of the US society in the second part of the 1950s and in the 1960s or the possibility of representing an actual event by literary means in general.

In order to present the whole picture of the events that led to the violent murders of the Clutters' family and its aftermath, Capote carried out a detailed investigation of both killers' backgrounds and included not only the information gathered in direct interviews with Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, but also short autobiographies that both men wrote in prison, a brief account of Perry's life written by his own father in order to enable him to obtain a parole, letters written to Perry by his sister Barbara and other sources of information that shed light on both criminals' upbringing and relationships with their relatives. Nevertheless, the writer decided to populate his novel with a number of secondary characters and their (dysfunctional) family relationships that justifies further examination. For example, I refer to the Clutters themselves, to the other prisoners that are incarcerated with Perry and Dick at the Kansas State Penitentiary, and, albeit marginally, other dramatis personae that appear in the text.

It seems clear that the amount of space that Truman Capote devoted to (mostly dysfunctional) family relationships points to the importance of this subject in the context of the whole novel. Nevertheless, I am convinced that it is one of the main topics of the book not only because of the number of pages it covers, but also owing to the functions it performs. My hypothesis is that the subject of dysfunctional family relationships is one of the core structural elements of *In Cold Blood* and helps to achieve a host of aims, which I will try to prove in the analysis I will develop in this end-of-degree project. I will try to analyse its existence in relation to different characters of the book (ranging from the main protagonists to characters with limited presence in the novel) and answer the following question: "What are the different objectives that dysfunctional family relationships fulfil in the construction of the plot of *In Cold Blood*?" In each case, I will firstly begin with the description and analysis of how the subject affects the character (or group of characters) and will continue by valuing the possible functions the appearance of the topic serves.

1.4 Methodology

In order to answer the question “What are the different objectives that dysfunctional family relationships fulfil in the construction of the plot of *In Cold Blood*” I will firstly develop a detailed analysis of the different complicated family relationships depicted in the novel and group them according to the character(s) they are associated with.

The first and longest section will be devoted to Perry, whose traumatic childhood is described at different parts of the novel and constitutes one of the main phenomena that develop the at-first-sight absurd empathy for a murderer. The lack of family love that Perry experienced might furnish an explanation for some of the most startling and contrasting episodes of the story, such as the pitiless murders on one hand and his effort to make his victims feel comfortable on the other.

The second section will be devoted to Dick. Although his character does not offer as much material with respect to an unhappy childhood, the burning feeling of envy and grudge related to the lack of resources stems precisely from that stage. Conversely, Dick himself seems unable to form a functional family and his jealousy and bitterness thwart all his attempts to do so.

Apart from the protagonists, a great many other characters’ family relationships show signs of not being very harmonious. Even though some scholars express themselves in the way that the Clutters, as Capote described them, are the paragons of an ideal American family of their time, there is a number of more recently published studies that describe the Clutters’ family as a group of people that, despite of presenting an outward aura of happiness and satisfaction, do not get along as well as it looks. These studies draw attention to a number of negative elements such as subjugation, lack of communication, vanity or disinterest and shame.

The family backgrounds of Dick and Perry’s fellow inmates will be commented on in the fourth section, which will draw a parallelism between them and the protagonists and forge links with the abovementioned Capote’s thesis that US society of his time was not able to tackle the problems originated by unstable or violent households

Finally, the last section will examine those characters that do not fall into any of the previously mentioned groups. I will try to represent various negative

elements that affect the family life of some of the Clutter's neighbours or even characters external to Holcomb. The omnipresence of the analysed issue throughout the plot of *In Cold Blood* and the fact that it affects a whole range of characters pertaining to different social classes emphasizes the importance it had for Truman Capote.

Once I have given an account of the problematic interrelations between relatives, their origins, and the way they affect each of the characters involved, I will proceed to attempt to clarify the function they fulfil in the development of the plot. Amongst other elements, I will allude to those of characterization, atmosphere creation (included the one related to the Gothic), a way to track the origins of a violent or antisocial behaviour or a way to criticise the US society.

2. Dysfunctional family relationships by characters

2.1 Perry Smith

The majority of literary and other professionals that decided to explore the ocean of multiple meanings and multifaceted characters called *In Cold Blood*, even if their conclusions and interpretation may be far apart from each other, agree on the premise that Perry Smith is the main protagonist of Capote's magnum opus. In absolute terms, the number of pages, scenes and allusions devoted to Smith exceeds by far the space that is allotted to the other personae all together.

As is the case of some of the other participants in the development of the tragical story, the reader has a privileged access to Perry's mind and many of the incidents are narrated from his point of view. Besides, his autobiographical statement written at the request of the psychiatrist that compiled a report on the murderer's mindset, is reproduced verbatim. Furthermore, Smith is the main focus of a wealth of accounts given by other characters that are also included in the novel. That is the case of the abovementioned declaration written by his father with the purpose of helping his son to achieve a parole, the psychiatrist's report itself, one of the letters his sister Barbara sent Peery when he was in the Lansing prison, a scrutiny of this correspondence carried out by his fellow prisoner Willie-Jay as well as a missive he received during his final imprisonment from his former colleague from the army, Don Cullivan. Therefore, the readers have at their disposal a significant amount of information that makes it possible to "get into Perry's shoes" and enables the development of at the first sight unlikely empathy for or even identification with the person that murdered four innocent people.

From some of the abovementioned sources, we learn that Perry comes from a racially mixed background: his father of Scottish origin and his mother was Cherokee. Growing up in the 1930s as a half-Indian was not easy and our protagonist had to face different kinds of racial prejudice and discrimination. Once his dysfunctional family background obliged him to live in an orphanage, the nuns punished him callously for wetting the bed and did not hesitate to call him "nigger". Xenophobia related to his racial background continued to harass him even in his adult years: some of the witnesses of his acts preceding and following the Clutter murders identified him with a pinch of scorn as "Mexican".

Nevertheless, the most obvious link between Perry and dysfunctional family ties is rooted in the relationship that his parents maintained. During a limited time, they got on well and experienced certain success as rodeo riders and their four children felt proud of them. On the other hand, the family was always on the move, and money and food were scarce. Smith himself locates the origins of his urinary incontinence in the lack of a balanced diet during his early years and blames the overconsumption of condensed milk (Capote 138). However, the psychological trauma he went through in his childhood seems to be a more plausible cause of this and other Perry's conditions.

Once his parents were not able to continue working as rodeo performers, a variety of problems arose. Alcohol and infidelity kindled a circle of violence that first led to the death his mother, who choked on vomit. Capote himself commented on Perry's origins: "His life had been so incredibly abysmal that I Don't see what chance he had as a little child except to steal and run wild" (Plimpton 12). In addition, Rance expands the Smiths' family tragedy to a social level: "with Perry Smith's wayward mother being presented as a victim of economic depression as well as alcohol, the extent to which her son's criminal career appears to have been mapped in advance has to count as a social than merely a domestic tragedy" (84).

Later, his brother Jimmy's jealousy (originated arguably by being a witness to his parents' ordeal) originated two ensuing suicides: his wife's and his own. The following family member to take her own life was his sister Fern, who, after changing her name to Joy, entered in a spiral of alcohol and sex, quite similar to her mother's plight. Perry himself attempted to commit a suicide (he had considered it an option at different stages of the plot) by starvation at the Kansas State Penitentiary and was not far from achieving his aim. Nevertheless, a postcard from his father made him change his mind and the protagonist encountered his death at the gallows. The last member of the family to commit suicide was his own father, who did so at an advanced age, years after his son Perry was executed. The only surviving member of the family at the end of the novel is Barbara, who fears that the terrible curse that destroyed the rest of her family may also end with her or her family's lives. It is interesting to refer to the fact that Barbara's name is one of the few that were altered by Capote. This detour from the principles he stated for the nonfiction novel might be explained

by his wish to preserve the young lady's privacy and prevent her family relationships from going dysfunctional.

When Perry still was a teenager, his father recovered him and both men lived together for a few years that were overly positive. All the same, when his father's project to earn a living by building and managing a hunting lodge in Alaska proved to be a complete failure, the disappointment stemming from all the time, money and effort the father and son invested in the project were so sharp, that both characters found themselves on the brink of committing a murder. Perry attempted to strangle his father, while Tex shot twice at him. Both characters survived the fight thanks to the father's good physical condition and also good luck: the gun had not been loaded. The outcome of this resort to violence was a hard blow for Perry's relationship with his father: Tex John Smith never went to visit his convicted son when he was incarcerated for the Holcomb murders. Perry also deplored that:

(...) the older I got, the less I was able to appreciate Dad. He knew everything, one way, but he didn't know anything, another way. Whole sections of me Dad was ignorant of. Didn't understand an iota of. Like I could play harmonica first time I picked one up. Guitar, too. I had this great natural musical ability. Which Dad didn't recognize. Or care about. I liked to read too. Improve my vocabulary. Make up songs. And I could draw. But I never got any encouragement – from him or anybody else "(Capote 140).

Still, the abovementioned postcard Perry receives from his father brings to an end his determination to commit suicide by rejecting all types of nourishment. This sudden change of stance may be perceived as an indicator that Tex, despite failing to visit Perry in the jail, continues being a figure of paramount importance for his son.

As I have already alluded to in the introduction, the emotions that Perry's sister Barbara feels towards him are fear and rejection. Barbara's dread of meeting her brother might be rooted in their last meeting, during which a violent argument over their father erupted and Perry pushed and held her sister against a wall. (Capote 188). On the other hand, Perry's feelings do not appear to be cordial either. At one moment of the plot, he deplores the fact that Barbara was not present at the Clutter's home when the killings took place.

In the patronizing letters, sent by Barbara to Perry when he was in the Lansing prison, she makes her brother responsible for his criminal deeds and acquits their common background from any blame. It is interesting to observe her jealous comments regarding their father. She would like to have a better

relationship with him and even mentions the possibility of inviting him to live with her and her husband. Nevertheless, despite all the negative events that harm the old man's relationship with Perry, his son seems to continue being his favourite child, which Barbara seems to deplore. Barbara used to be very keen on her little brother, she adored him. Due to the family's poverty, Perry was her only toy, a doll she used to scrub, comb, kiss and sometimes spank. (Capote 187).

Dysfunctional family relationships and the tragic deaths of her mother and two siblings (her father and last surviving brother are also to die due to unnatural causes) deeply affect Barbara's psyche. She shudders at the possibility of being affected by a malediction that seems to impend on her relatives and in one passage, whose atmosphere some scholars describe as proper of the Southern Gothic, the young wife imagines herself surrounded by the spectres of her dead kin (Capote 190).

As far as the relationships Perry himself builds up are concerned, it must be stated that he never develops a lasting relationship with a woman, the only exception being the rather platonic partnership he builds with the nurse that takes care of him after his traffic accident. The love affair does not consummate and his only token of it is a tattoo with the name of the young lady: Cookie (Capote 106). The other steady relationships, which does not perfectly fit in the realm of "family relationship", but deserve to be alluded to, are those Perry fosters with men: with the black man he claims he had beaten to death (which proves not to be true), with Willie-Jay and, of course, with Dick. In all these cases, the feelings that our protagonist experiences are those of admiration and approval and are indicators of his homoerotic tendencies.

In one of the first versions of the novel, Capote inserted a passage in which Smith admires the size of the above-mentioned black man's penis. Even though this section included a clarification that even a heterosexual man would feel surprised at the dimensions of the other man's manhood, it arguably yielded another clue about Perry Smith's homosexuality. Still, Capote decided to discard this scene in the final version of the novel. Rash explains that the reasons were related to a better acceptance of the book and also to the image of Perry the American writer intended to transmit (37-38, 68). The imaginary murder of the black man, which serves to arouse Dick's interest in Perry, might have served as Smith's attempt to combat his homoerotic inclinations. In a frequently cited

passage linked to Dick's sexuality, Perry states that "he had 'no respect for people who can't control themselves sexually', especially when the lack of control involved what he called 'pervertiness' - 'bothering kids', 'queer stuff' (!), rape" (Capote 204-205).

Very different is the union between Willie-Jay and Perry. The prison chaplain's clerk becomes a sort of Perry's spiritual guide and analyses not even Perry's, but also his sister's personality. Even though Perry's esteem for a petty thief might seem exaggerated, Willie-Jay creates one of the finest psychological portraits of the protagonist and pinpoints his main flaw: "explosive emotional reaction out of all proportion to the occasion" (Capote 54-55). Besides, Perry's failing to get in touch with Willie-Jay, once both men had been released from jail, seems to be at the beginning of the fateful events that finally led to the mass murder.

Hundreds of pages have been written about the ambiguous relationship both murderers maintained. Dick stands as the masculine, dominant and determined part of the couple, while Perry seems to be the emotional, feminine, and unstable one. At different parts of the novel, Dick addresses Perry with vocatives as "honey" (on numerous occasions), "baby", "sugar" etc. Not long before the definitive arrest of both men, Dick plans to abandon Perry as if the other man was a scornful and whiny wife. On the other hand, Smith in many other spots on the novel looks up to Hickock, misses him when they are apart or fantasizes about their common future in Mexico. There is another example of this type of homoerotic link, which, nevertheless, pertains to the extratextual level: the relationship Perry develops with Truman Capote.

This connection takes us to the last section of the analysis of Perry: what are the functions the detailed description of Smith's dysfunctional family relationships bears for the whole of the work? The most obvious reason, which seems plausible also in the case of other novels with realistic elements, is that the considerable amount of information the reader receives on Perry's difficult background allows for a better characterization¹ of this character. This convincing representation of Perry, however, does not appear to be an end in itself. I consider that one of the reasons is an almost Zolaesque condemnation of the US

¹ Baila-Bigné does not hesitate to speak about Perry's humanization (39).

society of Capote's time, which was not able to respond in an adequate way to problems occurring as a consequence of children growing in families suffering from addictions, violence, and lack of financial resources (Candelaria 55). Even if Perry shows signs of a variety of artistic talents, such as those related to literature, drawing singing and playing musical instruments, nobody seems to correctly appreciate them and the inability of his father and Dick to value those abilities brings about a deterioration of the respective relationships and increase Perry's melancholy. The only person that seemed to properly recognize the worth of this character's natural skills was the author himself. Nonetheless, the doom that originated in Smith's dysfunctional family seems to be stronger than any attempt to counteract its effects and the thorough description of Perry's background enables the reader to understand how he came to murder four innocent people. Taking into account that even one of Perry's major antagonists, agent Dewey, recognizes the influence of Perry's harsh family background on the gruesome violence the young man committed, we can only agree on the plausibility of Baila-Bigné's thesis that the main purpose of digging into Smith's harsh family background is to build empathy towards the killer (31)².

The second reason some specialists propose for explaining the prominence of the character of Perry and a comparatively limited space devoted to Dick are the similarities the writer noted between his own life and Perry Smith's. The two men's likeness was obvious at first sight: Capote and Smith's height was far below the national average. While in Smith's case a tragic accident stressed his shortness, Capote's bodily constitution was a product of genetics. One more conspicuous similitude between Truman and Perry is their sexual orientation. While Capote was openly gay, Smith's sexual preferences are just hinted at in the book. Still, the number of allusions is so relevant, that there seems to be no doubt about Perry's homosexuality. In relation to this, Wróbel affirms that: "The sympathy Capote had for the two criminals —chiefly for Smith with whom he identified more— is one of the book's main overtones." (11).

Even the main topic of this end-of-degree project is a feature that puts the two men together. Capote's upbringing was ruined by alcoholism, violence, infidelity, and abandonment, too. What is more, both men shared a profound

² The question of empathy is further developed also by Candelaria (47, 50-52) and Rash (81-82), who arrive at similar conclusions as Baila-Bigné.

interest in the arts and aesthetic curiosity in general. After an initial reluctance on Smith's part, the character and the author developed a deep friendship and Capote admitted that at times he shuddered at the idea that, given all the above-mentioned points in common, if things had developed differently, he might have ended up as the protagonist of his nonfiction novel.

Finally, some critics, as Candelaria (54), assert that the title of the text does not refer only to the Clutters' murders. They claim that the name Capote chose for his masterpiece alludes also to the US judicial system: the authorities condemned and executed both men in cold blood, even if, as the author made it clear at different parts of his magnum opus, a more plausible option would have been to resort to psychiatric treatment.³ Wöll affirms that the detailed description of the murderers' childhood trauma "reduces the offenders' culpability and agency, effectively making them victims of their mixing outside objective reality with perturbed personal subjectivity" (61).

2.2 Dick Hickock

In the shadow of the almost ubiquitous character of Smith, Hickock's background, worries and desires receive comparatively less attention than his partner in crime. Still, the subject analysed in this study does not elude him at all. Albeit Hickock family setting, especially when compared to Smith's, might seem untroubled, there exist a range of phenomena that align with the topic examined. At various stages of the novel, Dick's father is referred to as loving, but at the same time very strict. The murderer's early wishes to socialize with his peers were curbed by that sometimes-overbearing father and his academic ambitions (he wanted to become an engineer) were thwarted by the lack of money. These repressed desires evolved into a burning jealousy towards people that, in Dick's eyes, looked well-to-do without deserving it.

After the symptomatic childhood scene, in which Dick steals and one by one crashes the shells his neighbour had brought from vacation on the shore,

³ There is still a third possible interpretation of the title of the book. Some experts, mostly those not very favourable to Capote, contend that the title may also refer to the way in which Capote cold bloodily used other people's suffering to his own monetary profit. They, for example, allude to how the author had to wait for the convicted men to be executed in order to be able to finish and publish his book (Brady 48).

Dick continues to express contempt for affluent people (as in the Florida holidays passage) and materializes his hatred in the killing of the Clutter family. Being Perry the material author of the mass murder, Hickock might reasonably be called the intellectual author of the slaying.

Unlike his associate, Dick comes to form a family. He gets married three times and begets, according to his mother, three precious little boys (Capote 169). All the same, none of these ties is successful: the psychiatrist Dr. Jones informs that Hickock “is uncomfortable in his relationships to other people and has a pathological inability to form and hold enduring personal attachments” (Capote 295). Despite keeping good memories of his first wife, Dick does not hesitate to claim, in a similar way that Perry did in relation to his sister Barbara, that he would have enjoyed the idea of his second wife being between the Holcomb victims.

Moreover, while Perry’s homosexuality is only implied from all the allusions that appear over the novel, a different type of sexual issue that affects Dick’s relation to other people is openly spoken about: Hickock is a pedophile and only Smith’s rapid intervention prevents Dick from “busting” Nancy. Presumably, this psychiatric disorder provoked the failure of the last of Dick’s marriages. Yet, although Dick admits this perversity, his distorted and slightly idealized perception of his own personality allows him to call himself repeatedly “a normal” (Capote 101, 116, 118, 204).

With regard to the function that the depiction of Dick’s dysfunctional family relationships has in the novel, one reasonable explanation is the characterization of the protagonist and clarification of the reasons that made him embark on the terrible project of slaying the Clutter family. Tell maintains that “Capote’s characterization of Smith and Hickock strengthened his arguments against capital punishment” (10). Since Hickock childhood was not wrecked by such suffering as in the case of Smith, the building of sympathy seems to be more problematic. Still, the will to create a well-rounded character may account for the room dedicated to Dick’s origins. Furthermore, the frustration Dick suffered by the inability of pursuing his studies at college shows how the supposed American dream came to nothing and did not enable talented youngsters (Dick’s intelligence was assessed as being far above average) to enrol at university.

Capote, once again, holds up a mirror to the US society and the falsity of some of its tenets.

2.3 The Clutters

Even though a considerable amount of scholarship, dating usually to the 1960s and 1970s, construed the depiction Capote makes of the Clutters as a representation of an ideal American middle-class family that is destroyed by forces of devil coming from lower social strata, a number of more recent papers (Baila-Bigné, Olsza) refer to the farmer's family in less flattering terms and some even link the Clutter family with the realm of the Gothic (Rash).

Apparently, Herb Clutter is a loving husband and father, a spiritual pillar not only of his religious community but also of whole Holcomb: a self-made man and a prototype of a successful farmer. Leaving apart this rather superficial assessment of the character and analysing closely Herb's personality, we might well come to a completely different conclusion. Baila-Bigné comments on the ambiguous portrayal of Herb: "Mr. Clutter is presented as an outstanding man in his community, but a cold and authoritative figure for his children and wife, whose love he seems to take for granted (47).

Mr. Clutter actively organizes and participates in numerous charitable events and activities and serves as a kind of role model and guru for his community. Nonetheless, Andy Erhart, Herb's former classmate from the Kansas State University, describes him as "a proud man" (Capote 87). When a group of hunters invade his farm and offer to pay the customary tax, he rejects their proposition by saying that he is not as poor as it might look. Besides, Herb might appear more interested in farming than in his family; his wife says: "My husband cares more for those trees than he does for his children" (Capote 24).

Hence, the most negative picture of the farmer comes to light when examining his family relationships. He is a strict and stubborn man and does not accept any opinion contrasting with his own: "his laws were his laws" (Capote 19). Rash states that Capote depicts Herb as "a staunch authoritarian" (23). For example, he orders her daughter Nancy to begin a steady estrangement from her boyfriend Bobby, who seems to be an intelligent, responsible, and amiable young gentleman and is deeply in love in Nancy. For this reason, it is really striking to

realize that the motive of Herb's command is the fact that Bobby is Roman Catholic and the Clutters are Methodists. Mr. Clutter was the main initiator and supporter of the construction of the First Methodist Church in Garden City and appears to bask in the popularity he enjoys among the fellow members of his religious community. Hence, he wishes to maintain an outward image of power and authority and does not waver to sacrifice his own daughter's happiness. Brady argues that: "The marriage between the two [Nancy and Bobby] would be a religious conflict that might threaten Mr. Clutter's high status within his church" (68).

Another example of Clutter's rigid attention to his own rules is his absolute rejection of substances that he considers inappropriate, such as coffee, tobacco, or alcohol. All his employees must sign a contract that stipulates that consumption of alcohol will lead to an immediate dismissal. Yet, during the last days before the killings, Nancy noticed on various occasions the smell of smoke, which may indicate that even the perfect Herb Clutter was prone to weakness. We can only guess about the possible reason of the "awful mood" that led him to smoke. One possible explanation of Herb's perturbation could be his wife's illness. Bonnie suffered immensely after giving birth to each of her four children, being the condition that affected her the postpartum psychosis. Still, some scholars identified "Mr. Clutter's constant need for perfection as a main contributor to this sickness and noted that she was constantly troubled about whether or not she disappointed someone or put someone out" (Edge 16).

Bonnie did not manage to overcome the last crisis caused by the birth of Kenyon and lives, in relation to the other members of her family she shares the household with, in a kind of parallel world. Bonnie does not sleep in the same room as her husband, as she took advantage of one of the dormitories that became vacant when her older daughters had left home. She does not participate in the abovementioned philanthropic activities her husband and younger children are involved with, does not do any housework—her husband was obliged to learn to cook—, suffers from depression, headache, and fears that her son and daughters will remember her as a kind of ghost. Once in a while, she retires to the Wesley Medical Centre in Wichita (Capote 19) and finds solace in recalling the good old times before her marriage. In relation to this, Sokołowska-Paryż highlights Bonnie's "nostalgia for the past" (146). The other inhabitants of

Holcomb are not ignorant about Bonnie's condition, crises, and spells and, when the news of the mass killing reaches them, they, quite shockingly, suspect that Bonnie was the material author of the crime.

Bonnie is for the rest of the small community a sort of spectral being. Even after her murder, she haunts her former neighbours in their dreams and the scarecrow that is placed in the Clutter's garden dons her dress. Mrs. Clutter's confinement, inability to function socially, the uneasiness she causes in her neighbours and her ghostly character inspired an array of scholars to analyse her role within the framework of the Gothic and the Southern Gothic in particular. Olsza goes as far as making a comparison between Bonnie Clutter and Bertha Mason, the violently insane first wife of Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: "Transformed by Capote into a Gothic character, 'a madwoman in the attic,' when still alive, Mrs. Clutter becomes a literal ghost, haunting the neighbours with every appearance" (145).

On their part, Kenyon and Nancy directly suffer the consequences of their father's severity. Kenyon gives the impression of being withdrawn and sensitive; he presumably takes more after his mother than after his father and nobody appears to understand him. When analysing Kenyon's character, Rash claims that he "is also singled out as an outsider with a potential for criminality, though ostensibly he should belong with the Kansas farm world where he was born and raised" (24). She refers, among other elements, to Kenyon's delight in killing coyotes.

As far as Nancy is concerned, she looks to be determined to overcome the tense family atmosphere by giving herself to the other members of her community and renouncing her free will in favour of her father's imposition. Nancy's nervous nature might be inferred from the habit she is not able to break: biting her nails. Olsza also points to the fact that, despite living in the same house, each of the family members withdraws into their reclusive place: "Mr. Clutter into his office, Mrs. Clutter into her bedroom; the daughter Nancy into the kitchen and her bedroom, and the son Kenyon into the cellar" (145).

Moreover, what appears to be at least bewildering, is that neither of Bonnie's children seems to be deeply concerned about her poor mental health. In a way, their mother represents an encumbrance for them. They must keep the noise levels to a minimum, which limits Kenyon when he wants to play the horn

and Nancy when she intends to entertain the neighbours' children, who admire her. The siblings seem to have accepted Bonnie's condition as something inevitable or natural and, in a similar way that in the case of Bertha Mason, do not appear to be severely affected by their mother's plight.

Besides, the fact that some critics come to compare the Clutters with the Smiths: "Both parents are puritanical authoritarians, both mothers neurotic, both sons (Perry and Kenyon) introspective and moody" (Pizer 117) sheds light on the degree to which the Clutter family may be considered a prototype of a deconstructed family.

With reference to the function of this not very favourably representation of the Clutters' family relationships —Olsza ventures to call them "toxic" (148)—, I argue, together with some of the abovementioned scholars, that one of Capote's main objectives was the creation of a gloomy atmosphere that fits into the framework of the Gothic. The second reason I allude to as a potential candidate to account for this chilling portrayal of the "Godfearing farming folk" is the author's convictions that even the happiest looking households may conceal considerable pain and suffering. A phenomenon that is indicative, once again, of the failure of the American dream. Olsza, in reference to the Clutters' funeral, put it this way: "the family loses its individuality and becomes a shrouded token of the failed American Dream, if not a warning for the over-confident dreamers" (146)

2.4 Dick and Perry's fellow inmates

The last independent section, albeit the shortest one, is devoted to the prisoners that spent the last days of their lives with Hickock and Smith on the Death Row in the Kansas State Penitentiary for Men.

There possibly might not be a clearer example of a dysfunctional family relationship than a young man that decides to kill and murders his parents and sister. Such was the case of Lowell Lee Andrews, our protagonists' fellow prisoner. He did not want to be known anymore as the overweight and bespectacled young boy, which makes it possible for the reader to infer a record of bullying. Andrews dreamt about a life of luxury and adventure and the only way he conceived to attain his objective was to ruthlessly murder his closest relatives.

The two recently arrived convicts, George Ronald York and James Douglas Latham, younger than the main characters, resemble in a way Dick and Perry's origins. While York's family relationships at first sight seem unproblematic and reminds us of Hickock's, "Latham's background was (...) every bit as bleak as Perry's" (Capote 323): a large family with limited resources and fighting parents that finally abandon their descendants. Apart from the killing spree that Latham perpetrated with his associate, this biographical account related to his hopeless family ties is the only piece of information Capote provides about the characters. This, once again, highlights the relevance the topic had for the author. Among the motives for the inclusion of these reports rank high those that had been already mentioned while analysing other characters: the cruelty of the death penalty that transmits the false perception that the problem is solved by executing the culprits and the absolute incapacity of the American society to provide specialized (such as psychiatric) help to the citizens that urgently need it and to detect this necessity.

2.5 Other characters

Excepting the personae already analysed, there are still a few participants in the development of the plot of *In Cold Blood*, whose family conditions strikes the reader as hopeless or mournful. For instance, Susan Kidwell cannot remember her father: he left his family when his daughter was a child.

Mrs. Ashida, the Clutters' Japanese neighbour, is a representative of a wife, whose desires and opinions are not taken seriously; her life depends entirely on her husband's decisions. Even before the horrible event took place, Mrs. Ashida had informed Herb that they would move away, because her husband is convinced that they "could do better" (Capote 47) in a different place. Once the Clutters have been slain, Mr. Ashida resumes the topic. Despite admitting that she does not want to leave, Mrs. Ashida, after having vainly argued with her husband, surrenders by saying: "O.K., you're the boss, let's go." (Capote 124)

The limited role of women in the decision-making in the average American families, as portrayed in Capote's novel, is another symptom of the problems that the American society gave signs of. Further examples of this depiction of women might be Mrs. Dewey, Mrs. Meier and, of course, Mrs. Clutter, impeded both by

her overbearing husband and the illness she suffers from. Talking about the character of Herb, Manuel González de la Aleja claims that “su fuerte personalidad y presencia han sido, incluso, capaces de anular completamente a su mujer” (74).

An interesting occurrence of an encounter with a dysfunctional family that, however, provides certain grounds for hope, is when Dick and Perry, during their frantic journey from one point of the USA to the other, come across Bill and Johnny: a young boy and his elderly and sick grandfather. When Bill's aunt they had lived with died, they were evicted from the farm they used to rent and embarked on a peregrination with an uncertain destination but clear objective: to find Johnny's sister and move in with her. Although the old man is seriously ill and the money the couple can count on is equal to zero, the attitude the boy seems to have adopted is full of cheerfulness, energy and free of grudge. In the general context of the work, Bill embodies one of the rare moments of sparkling optimism. Yet, in spite of Bill's positive stand, the anecdote highlights the reality that the authorities of the United States seemed unable to provide for the needs not only of the old and poor, but also the ill and those who should still be attending school.

The paradoxical nature of the US civilization, that despite of being able to launch space missions and land on the Moon, did not manage to take care of its needy citizens and the gender inequalities hampering family relationships at all social levels appear to be the most probable explanations for the role that the elements examined in this part of the study play in the text.

3. Conclusion

Once the most recurrent or symptomatic problematic family ties that emerge throughout *In Cold Blood* have been described, evaluated and the motives for their inclusion accounted for, the time comes for the question presented in the introduction to be answered: What are the different objectives that dysfunctional family relationships fulfil in the construction of the plot of *In Cold Blood*?

Discarding the most conspicuous reason that is not at all specific to Capote's text and its importance for the novel can be traced back to the origins of the genre (I refer to the characterization of the protagonists and portrayal of

their background), the subject plays an array of roles that are distinctive for the most famous non-fiction novel.

Capote's opposition towards the death penalty and the decision to use the title of the novel also to refer to Perry and Dick's execution seem to be some of the reasons that led the author to offer a detailed depiction of both protagonists' family backgrounds. As the development of empathy towards killers that violently ended the lives of four guileless people is not an easy task, the American author embarked on a project that finally involved various accounts of mainly Perry's dismal upbringing and the usage of multiple points of view. If even some of the members of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, that participated in the discovery of the victims' corpses, admit the harshness of the punishment alluding to Smith's bleak personal history, we, as Capote's readers, have to admit that he achieved his goal. As Baila-Bigné explains: "The more we know, the more we understand, and the more we understand, the more we can empathize" (88). Even if it is true that the execution doubtlessly prevents a murderer from committing the same crime again, this measure proves totally inefficient in tackling the problems that made the convict perpetrate the terrible deed and in reducing the possibility that other individuals coming from similar backgrounds will become future killers.

Furthermore, as I have tried to explain in previous pages, Truman Capote appeared to be shocked by the affinity between his own and Perry's biography. It is not only the difficult childhood, affected by addictions, violent quarrels, and abandonment, but also the homosexual orientation, dwarfish physical constitution and, of course, artistic talent. As I have already mentioned, Capote admitted that he was left aghast when he realized that if the events had worked out differently, he might well have found himself in Perry's place. It seems reasonable that another motive for devoting so much space to Smith's horrendous family relationships was based on the similarities between the hero and the author. Moreover, Brady explains the attention that the author devoted to both criminals: "Capote is interested in those who do not fit into the rest of the society and in how they create their social sphere and morality (46).

Besides, the gloomy images associated with family relationships that are far from happy and satisfying are closely connected to the principles and characteristics of the Southern Gothic. Capote himself had used the tools of this movement in some of his previous novels and short stories and confessed his

admiration for its more important representatives, such as William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor. Hence, it does not appear surprising that, for instance, the character of Bonnie Clutter is depicted as a sort of a ghostly being. In consequence, the creation of atmosphere is one more function that the issue of dysfunctional family relationships fulfils.

Moreover, the fact that almost all family relationships depicted in the text are dysfunctional may be considered a symptom that the American society of Capote's time was dysfunctional itself. I agree with the scholars (such as Olsza) that conclude that one of the most important reason of writing *In Cold Blood* was Truman Capote's desire to expose and condemn the desperate situation many of his fellow citizens were facing. The inadequacy of the American judicial system and the inability of the American society in the 1960s to provide solutions for the Americans that suffered from poverty, psychiatric conditions, addiction or even the lack of economic resources inspired the author to use the portrayal of different types of dysfunctional families as a tool to bring light to that stark reality. In Olsza's words "America, Capote seems to suggest, is not a harmonious land of prosperity, but a place tormented by desires, ravaged by patriarchy and haunted by pangs of conscience (147). It looks like that not much hope is left for those who suffer, and Capote empathises with them.

Finally, having expounded the most relevant examples, symbolism and roles the dysfunctional family relationships play in the novel, I hope to have proved the validity of the hypothesis that they are one of the core structural elements of Capote's chef-d'oeuvre. The importance of the subject for the text is such that I argue that, had not Truman Capote based his work on it, *In Cold Blood* would be a completely different book.

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